

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

WILLIAM GEORGE KERCE,	:	Civil No. 3:10-CV-1678
	:	
Plaintiff	:	
	:	(Judge Kosik)
v.	:	
	:	(Magistrate Judge Carlson)
HARLEY LAPPIN, et al.	:	
	:	
Defendants.	:	

MEMORANDUM AND ORDER

The Plaintiff, a Federal inmate housed at the United States Penitentiary, Lewisburg, commenced this action by filing a *pro se* complaint on August 11, 2010. (Doc. 1). In his complaint Kerce names the Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Harley Lappin, and a dentist at the Lewisburg Penitentiary, Dr. Keith Baker, as Defendants. (Id.)

Kerce's complaint recites that he is a denture wearer and has been requesting that prison officials re-line his ill-fitting dentures. He insists that the delay in completing this task constitutes cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment to the United states Constitution. Kerce's complaint goes on to

premise the liability of Defendant Lappin upon his supervisory role within the federal prison system, alleging that Defendant Lappin is liable because he approved the Bureau of Prisons program statement governing prison dental services. Kerce then demands relief from the Defendants in the form of damages and an injunction directing the Defendants to provide him with better fitting dentures.(Id.)

Along with his complaint, Kerce has filed a motion for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (Doc. 2.) We will GRANT this motion, but having examined the Plaintiff's complaint we are notifying the Plaintiff that many of these allegations are subject to summary dismissal and we are directing the Plaintiff to file an amended complaint or otherwise respond to this order for the reasons set forth below.

This Court has a statutory obligation to conduct a preliminary review of *pro se* complaints which seek redress against government officials. Specifically, we are obliged to review the complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A which provides, in pertinent part:

(a) Screening. - The court shall review, before docketing, if feasible or, in any event, as soon as practicable after docketing, a complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity.

(b) Grounds for dismissal. - On review, the court shall identify cognizable claims or dismiss the complaint, or any portion of the complaint, if the complaint-

(1) is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted; or

(2) seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

Under Section 1915A, the court must assess whether a *pro se* complaint “fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” This statutory text mirrors the language of Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which provides that a complaint should be dismissed for “failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6).

With respect to this benchmark standard for legal sufficiency of a complaint, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has recently aptly noted the evolving standards governing pleading practice in federal court, stating that:

Standards of pleading have been in the forefront of jurisprudence in recent years. Beginning with the Supreme Court's opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (12007) continuing with our opinion in Phillips [v. County of Allegheny], 515 F.3d 224, 230 (3d Cir. 2008)]and culminating recently with the Supreme Court's decision in Ashcroft v. Iqbal –U.S.–, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009) pleading standards have seemingly shifted from simple notice pleading to a more heightened form of pleading, requiring a plaintiff to plead more than the possibility of relief to survive a motion to dismiss.

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 209-10 (3d Cir. 2009).

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all

reasonable inferences that can be drawn therefrom are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O'Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” Id. In keeping with the principles of Twombly, the Supreme Court recently underscored that a trial court must assess whether a complaint states facts upon which relief can be granted when ruling on a motion to dismiss. In Ashcroft v. Iqbal, ___ U.S. ___, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009), the Supreme Court held that, when considering a motion to dismiss, a court should “begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 1950. According to the Supreme Court, “[t]hreadbare

recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.” Id. at 1949. Rather, in conducting a review of the adequacy of complaint, the Supreme Court has advised trial courts that they must:

[B]egin by identifying pleadings that because they are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Id. at 1950.

Thus, a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a *pro se* plaintiff’s complaint must recite factual allegations which are sufficient to raise the plaintiff’s claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated:

[A]fter Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a “plausible claim for relief.” In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff’s entitlement to relief. A complaint has to “show” such an entitlement with its facts.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-11.

Applying this standard, the Court places the Plaintiff on notice that many of the allegations in the *pro se* complaint may be subject to dismissal for failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.

At the outset, to the extent that Kerce attempts to allege that these health care providers have violated his constitutional rights under the Eighth Amendment by demonstrating deliberate indifference to his medical needs through the dental treatment which they provided to him, Kerce faces an exacting burden in advancing a constitutional Eighth Amendment claim against these officials in their individual capacities. To sustain such a claim, the Plaintiff must plead facts which:

[M]eet two requirements: (1) “the deprivation alleged must be, objectively, sufficiently serious;” and (2) the “prison official must have a sufficiently culpable state of mind.” Farmer v. Brennan, 511 U.S. 825, 834, 114 S.Ct. 1970, 128 L.Ed.2d 811 (1994) (quotation marks and citations omitted). In prison conditions cases, “that state of mind is one of ‘deliberate indifference’ to inmate health or safety.” Id. “Deliberate indifference” is a subjective standard under Farmer-the prison official-defendant must actually have known or been aware of the excessive risk to inmate safety.

Beers-Capitol v. Whetzel 256 F.3d 120, 125 (3d Cir. 2001).

By including a subjective intent component in this Constitutional Eighth Amendment benchmark, the courts have held that a mere generalized knowledge that prisons are dangerous places does not give rise to an Eighth Amendment claim. See Jones v. Beard, 145 F. App’x 743 (3d Cir. 2005)(finding no Eighth Amendment violation

where inmate-plaintiff complained about cellmate who had a history of psychological problems, but where plaintiff failed to articulate a specific threat of harm during the weeks prior to an attack).

Applying this exacting standard, courts have frequently rejected Eighth Amendment claims based upon the level of dental care that an inmate received. See, e.g., Ham v. Greer, 269 F. App'x 149 (3d Cir. 2008); James v. Dep't of Corrections, 230 F. App'x 195 (3d Cir. 2007); Gillespie v. Hogan, 182 F. App'x 103 (3d Cir. 2006); Bronson v. White, No. 05-2150, 2007 WL 3033865 (M.D. Pa. Oct. 15, 2007); Gindraw v. Dendler, 967 F.Supp. 833 (E.D. Pa. 1997). This rule applies with particular force in a case such as this where it appears from the plaintiff's complaint that medical services were provided to the inmate but the prisoner is dissatisfied with the outcome of these dental procedures. In such instances, inmate Eighth Amendment complaints have been frequently dismissed by the courts. Id.

In rejecting these claims, it has long been held that courts will disavow any attempt to second-guess the propriety or adequacy of a particular course of treatment which remains a question of sound professional judgment. Inmates of Allegheny County Jail v. Pierce, 612 F.2d 754, 762 (3d Cir.1979). Instead, courts have defined the precise burden which an inmate must sustain in order to advance an Eighth Amendment claim against a dental professional premised on allegedly inadequate dental care, stating that:

The district court [may] properly dis[miss an] Eighth Amendment claim, as it concerned [a dental care giver], because [the] allegations merely amounted to a disagreement over the proper course of his treatment and thus failed to allege a reckless disregard with respect to his dental care. The standard for cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment, established by the Supreme Court in Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 104 (1976), and its progeny, has two prongs: 1) deliberate indifference by prison officials and 2) serious medical needs. “It is well-settled that claims of negligence or medical malpractice, without some more culpable state of mind, do not constitute ‘deliberate indifference.’” “Nor does mere disagreement as to the proper medical treatment support a claim of an eighth amendment violation.” . . . [The inmate] alleged no undue delay in receiving treatment and, as the district court noted, the evidence he presented established that he received timely care from [the prison dentist]. Although [an inmate plaintiff] may have preferred a different course of treatment, [t]his preference alone cannot establish deliberate indifference as such second-guessing is not the province of the courts.

James, 230 F.App’x. at 197-198.(citations omitted)

Therefore, Kerce must remain mindful of the demanding standards he must meet to sustain an Eighth Amendment claim against Dr. Baker since “the exercise by a doctor of his professional judgment is never deliberate indifference. See e.g. Brown v. Borough of Chambersburg, 903 F.2d 274, 278 (3d Cir.1990) (‘[A]s long as a physician exercises professional judgment his behavior will not violate a prisoner's constitutional rights.’)”. Gindraw ,967 F.Supp. at 836.

Further, to the extent that Kerce seems to seek to hold the director of the Bureau of Prisons personally liable for dental care decisions in the Lewisburg SMU simply by virtue of their supervisory roles in the prison system, his complaint runs afoul of the basic legal tents that guide supervisory liability in civil rights matters. It

is well-settled that a claim of a constitutional deprivation cannot be premised merely on the fact that the named Defendant was the prison warden, or a prison supervisor, when the incidents set forth in the complaint occurred. Quite the contrary, to state a claim under §1983, the Plaintiff must show that the supervisory Defendants, acting under color of state law, deprived him of a right secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States. 42 U.S.C. §1983; Morse v. Lower Merion School Dist., 132 F.3d 902 (3d Cir. 1997); see also Maine v. Thiboutot, 448 U.S. 1 (1980). Liability under § 1983 is personal in nature and can only follow personal involvement in the alleged wrongful conduct shown through specific allegations of personal direction or of actual knowledge and acquiescence in the challenged practice. Robinson v. City of Pittsburgh, 120 F.3d 1286 (3d Cir. 1997).

In particular, with respect to prison supervisors it is well-established that:

“A[n individual government] defendant in a civil rights action must have personal involvement in the alleged wrongdoing; liability cannot be predicated solely on the operation of respondeat superior. Personal involvement can be shown through allegations of personal direction or of actual knowledge and acquiescence.” Rode v. Dellarciprete, 845 F.2d 1195, 1207 (3d Cir.1988).

Evancho v. Fisher, 423 F.3d 347, 353 (3d Cir. 2005).

Kerce has not pleaded facts establishing personal direction or actual knowledge and acquiescence in unconstitutional conduct by the supervisory prison officials named in his complaint. This failure may be fatal with respect to Kerce’s claims as to these Defendants.

In this case, without the inclusion of some further well-pleaded factual allegations, the assertions made by Kerce appear to be little more than “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, [which as a legal matter] do not suffice.” Ashcroft v. Iqbal, supra 129 S.Ct. At 1979. We recognize, however, that in civil rights cases *pro se* plaintiffs often should be afforded an opportunity to amend a complaint before the complaint is dismissed in its entirety, See Fletcher-Hardee Corp. v. Pote Concrete Contractors, 482 F.3d 247, 253 (3d Cir. 2007), unless granting further leave to amend would be futile or result in undue delay. Alston v. Parker, 363 F.3d 229, 235 (3d Cir. 2004). Since the *pro se* complaint may not contain sufficient factual recitals to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or otherwise may seek relief which cannot be afforded to the plaintiff, the plaintiff is placed on notice that these allegations may be subject to dismissal under 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, and Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

The Court will, however, provide the Plaintiff with an opportunity to correct this potential deficiency in the *pro se* complaint, and avoid the possible sanction of dismissal of claims. Accordingly, **IT IS ORDERED** that the Plaintiff shall file an amended complaint or otherwise respond to this order on or before **September 2, 2010**. Any amended complaint or response shall be complete in all respects, and should address the issues raised by this Order. It shall be a new pleading which

stands by itself as an adequate complaint without reference to the complaint already filed. Any amended complaint shall be titled as an amended complaint and shall contain the docket number of this case. If the Plaintiff fails to file an amended complaint or otherwise respond by **September 2, 2010**, the Court will assume that the Plaintiff cannot provide further well-pleaded facts in support of this complaint, and will make appropriate recommendations regarding whether the complaint should be dismissed, for failure to *prosecute* by complying with this Court's order or for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.

S/Martin C. Carlson

Martin C. Carlson

United States Magistrate Judge

Dated: August 12, 2010